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The Shifting Place of Political Parties in Canadian Public Life

R. Kenneth Carty

Are Canadian Political Parties Empty Vessels?

Membership, Engagement and Policy Capacity

William Cross
and Lisa Young

Strengthening Canadian Democracy

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Strengthening Canadian Democracy / Renforcer la démocratie canadienne

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Since the 1960s, increased levels of education and changing social values have prompted calls for increased democratic participation, both in Canada and internationally. Some modest reforms have been implemented in this country, but for the most part the avenues provided for public participation lag behind the demand. The Strengthening Canadian Democracy research program explores some of the democratic lacunae in Canada's political system. In proposing reforms, the focus is on how the legitimacy of our system of government can be strengthened before disengagement from politics and public alienation accelerate unduly.

Depuis les années 1960, le relèvement du niveau d'éducation et l'évolution des valeurs sociales ont suscité au Canada comme ailleurs des appels en faveur d'une participation démocratique élargie. Si quelques modestes réformes ont été mises en œuvre dans notre pays, les mesures envisagées pour étendre cette participation restent largement insuffisantes au regard de la demande exprimée. Ce programme de recherche examine certaines des lacunes démocratiques du système canadien et propose des réformes qui amélioreraient la participation publique, s'intéressant par le fait même aux moyens d'affermir la légitimité de notre système de gouvernement pour contrer le désengagement de plus en plus marqué de la population vis-à-vis de la politique.

Strengthening Canadian Democracy / *Renforcer la démocratie canadienne*

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The Shifting Place of Political Parties in Canadian Public Life

R. Kenneth Carty

> Parties are responsible for what voters are most dissatisfied with in their politics. The evidence is clear that Canadians find their politics overly elite dominated, insufficiently responsive to their views, and lacking in opportunities for them to influence policy outcomes.
>
> William Cross, 2004

In the spring of 2003 the premier of British Columbia moved to keep a campaign promise that had the potential to dramatically reshape the province's electoral competition and the political parties that drive it. In seeking office, Premier Campbell had committed to convening a citizens' assembly on electoral reform, that would be charged with assessing the familiar first-past-the-post electoral system and then deciding whether a better one might be available. This initiative was part of a wider democratic agenda that included the first fixed election dates in Canada and open (televised) cabinet meetings. The premier argued that electoral systems were so fundamental to democracy that it was the province's citizens – not party politicians with their obvious conflict of interest on the subject – who ought to decide how to elect their legislature.[1] Thus any recommendation for change from the randomly chosen group of ordinary voters making up the citizens' assembly was to go straight to the electorate in a definitive referendum.

This initiative was surprising. We do not expect party elites, and particularly the principal beneficiaries of a particular institutional regime, to take the lead in promoting an agenda for change that is likely to constrain their activity or weaken their political position. And more specifically, given the importance of electoral rules in determining the framework for the structure and activities of political parties, we do not expect party politicians to recuse themselves from deciding what those rules should be. Such an approach to the reform of party competition is simply unprecedented.

Yet all this happened in British Columbia, and then, in the face of an ambivalent referendum result in May of 2005, the premier announced there would be another one – better prepared and publicly financed.[2]

Equally fascinating is the fact that four other provinces have been seriously considering electoral reform. In each case the premier, in office as leader of the party rewarded by the current electoral system, has been a key player in the process. Prince Edward Island's Pat Binns provided for a plebiscite in November 2005 to allow the voters a say on the proposal made by an independent commission and fine-tuned by the Commission on PEI's Electoral Future[3]; New Brunswick's Bernard Lord initiated a wide-ranging, representative Commission on Legislative Democracy, which was instructed to recommend a proportional electoral system[4]; Quebec's Jean Charest has seen a major electoral reform bill introduced in his province's National Assembly[5]; and Ontario's Dalton McGuinty has announced a citizens' assembly on electoral reform for his province.[6]

For much of the last decade and a half, electoral reform has been on the agenda of a large number of political systems around the world.[7] However, electoral reform in Canada has long been regarded as an oxymoron, and it has been generations since the issue was debated seriously by leaders of our major national political parties.[8] There are competing explanations as to why, after so many years of benign neglect, the subject should suddenly emerge in this country (Carty 2004; Cross 2005). Whatever our intuitions, it is important that we not overlook the central role that party leaders have played in this turn of events. It would appear that each leader has recognized a deep public disaffection with political parties and the wider electoral process – the very institutions at the centre of their political existence – and has been moved to respond to it.

Certainly much of that disaffection became clear as the British Columbia Citizens' Assembly went about its work.[9] Over fourteen hundred ordinary citizens wrote to it, approximately three thousand came out to the 50 public hearings held from one end of the province to the other, and the Assembly's own discussions and research all echoed a recurring theme: our contemporary electoral and parliamentary politics do not function in a manner that allows citizens to see their concerns and issues represented, reflects their values and aspirations for their society, fosters public discussion on the day-to-day realities of their lives, or permits them to influence the directions of their governments. Canadians see, at the heart of this syndrome, a set of political parties and a pattern of party competition that are essentially dysfunctional. The hope of electoral reform is not to abolish partisanship as a central dynamic in a freely competitive politics. It is to develop the institutional incentives to build political parties that are open and responsive to ordinary voters and that will stimulate positive and constructive electoral competition, offering voters choices that enhance their ability to direct their representatives and shape their governments.

Members of British Columbia's Citizens' Assembly epitomized the very model of an engaged democratic citizenry. Plucked at random from the voters' list, those 160 individuals came together in the Assembly knowing little about electoral systems – many claimed not to know or care much about politics generally. However, they responded eagerly to the opportunity to participate in a process designed to rethink the public life of their provincial community. Giving up 30 to 40 days of their year, they absorbed a course in electoral systems, listened to their fellow citizens in an extensive set of public hearings, and then engaged in a sophisticated modelling exercise. This process culminated in a debate during which they reasoned with one another in a genuine effort to decide what was best for the province.[10] The extraordinary commitment and involvement of Assembly members belies any notion that ordinary citizens are either uninterested in, or incapable of, participating in public decision-making. It confirmed the proposition that real deliberative debate is possible, and reinforced the view that the adversarial wrangling among political parties that passes for our electoral and legislative politics only frustrates constructive discussion of public issues and inhibits citizens from engaging in political life.

One of the greatest surprises of the British Columbia Citizens' Assembly experience was the group's conclusion. Most observers probably expected some recommendation for change. Many anticipated that it would be some form of mixed member proportional (MMP) electoral system. That kind of system has recently been adopted in New Zealand, Scotland and Wales and has been enthusiastically endorsed by the Law Commission of Canada.[11] And while the Assembly carefully considered an MMP system, it ultimately opted (by 4:1) to recommend the far less well-known single transferable vote (STV) electoral system, whereby people can rank their choices among candidates and parties. Few countries use STV to elect their national legislatures, and it is worth reflecting on why these citizens ultimately chose it, by 20:1, over our current, familiar single-member plurality system.

There was a real tension in the Assembly on the question of the role that political parties should play in

our democratic life. On the one hand, members generally believed that disciplined parties get in the way of a genuine representation of their views, that politicians quickly lose touch with those who have elected them, and that their party system does not present clear choices on issues. On the other hand, they saw political parties as necessary for "true democracy" but regarded as fundamentally "unacceptable" an electoral system in which a party can win a majority of seats without a majority of votes and in which seat shares do not reflect vote shares.[12] Thus Assembly members were seeking an electoral system that would recognize and even enhance the centrality of political parties – hence the insistence on proportional representation – and at the same time transform, or at least mitigate, the highly centralized and disciplined character of Canadian parties, centred as they are on dominant leaders. They recommended an STV electoral system precisely because it combines the proportional representation of political parties with increased voter choice and enhanced local accountability.

What is striking about these views of members of the British Columbia Citizens' Assembly is that they are not in the least surprising. Survey work done for the Lortie Royal Commission on Electoral Reform and Party Financing in the early 1990s, and repeated by the Institute for Research in Public Policy 10 years later, show exactly the same set of electoral values and opinions about political parties among the wider public (Blais and Gidengil 1991; Howe and Northrup 2000). Canadians believe they need political parties, but they do not like or trust them. If given a choice, they want an electoral system that will treat parties more "fairly." This leads me to a consideration of just what kind of political parties we have in Canada, and what they offer ordinary citizens.

Canadian Political Parties

> The pure and simple continuation of their own existence becomes the principal preoccupation... the natural form of the political party risks being corrupted into an unwholesome caricature, a machine for winning elections.
>
> Andre Siegfried, 1906

Canadian political parties are unique institutions. In most democratic countries, political parties naturally exist to reflect and articulate the society's basic divisions – be they social, economic, ethnic or geographic. Articulating distinctive ideological perspectives or ideas of the good life, such parties are the active and quite deliberate instruments of division and conflict. Their task is to mobilize distinctive groups in an effort to advance their claims, promote their interests and win them benefits. Voters can readily identify which party speaks for them, and in this sense political parties provide a vehicle for their citizen clienteles to participate in a clearly defined, democratic electoral struggle. It does not work this way in Canada; it is not even supposed to.

From the very beginning, the major Canadian parties were designed to obfuscate rather than articulate interests, blur rather than sharpen divisions. The implicit proposition is that Canadian society is so inherently fragile that political disintegration is something politicians dare not risk by championing the conflicting interests of a single region, linguistic group, religious community or economic class. The result is that politicians who are genuinely nationally minded need to build broad-tent parties that offer a place for any and all Canadians. This is the famous brokerage theory of Canadian politics, shaped by parties that necessarily operate quite indiscriminately (see Carty 1995, 195). In an ideal brokerage world there need be only two such parties, ensuring that elections provide voters with a choice of government. Such parties will inevitably be drawn to the median voter and will feel free to steal policies and programs from one another in order to do so. The result will be a pair of major parties that differ little in what they offer the electorate or in the opportunities they offer citizens. And for our entire history two such parties, the Liberals and the Conservatives, have, in uneven turn, pre-empted our political lives and national governments.

Of course, Canadians have actually had a good deal of experience with what Siegfried recognized as "natural" parties – those that represent distinctive clienteles. There is a long history of such parties rising in protest against the two oldest national parties – in protest against the very notion of brokerage organizations and their accommodative politics. Some have sought to represent a distinctive interest – McCarthyites, United Farmers, the Cooperative Commonwealth Federation and, later, the New Democratic Party; some have arisen to articulate the claims of a particular region – Social Credit, the Bloc Québécois. In each case, they have reflected the frustrations of voters unable to find in the brokerage parties a politically acceptable mechanism for meaningful representation and participation. But, shut out of national office by an electoral system that favours the brokerage parties, they have been condemned to play a secondary role on the opposition benches in a government-dominated Parliament and so

most have had a limited lifespan.[15]

This is not to say that individual supporters or members of brokerage parties have had any significant role to play in defining the key orientations and messages of their political parties. Brokerage is, by its very nature, an elite activity. It needs strong and active party leaders able to stitch together a sufficiently broad blanket of often internally contradictory values and policies to attract the support necessary to dominate in a first-past-the-post electoral regime. As a consequence, Canadian parties have been primarily distinguished by their leaders, "whose mere name," as Siegfried put it a hundred years ago, "is a programme in itself" (1966, 136). In leader-centred, leader-dominated parties there is little room for individual partisans to do much more than show up at the polls on election day. Canada's brokerage parties allow their members and supporters to decide who, but rarely what, to vote for.

The building and sustaining of brokerage organizations has not been an easy task. The very rationale for the existence of such organizations – the great diversity of communities and interests in the country – militates against unified and disciplined mass membership. The solution has been the franchise-style organizational model adopted by Canadian parties (Carty 2002). In this model, parochially oriented party associations of volunteers in each electoral district are free to manage and control their own affairs, including the selection of local candidates and the conduct of constituency-level election campaigns. For its part, the parliamentary caucus of professional politicians (effectively dominated by a leader they have not chosen) disciplines its members and articulates party policy. This is a structural arrangement that gives local partisans a strong sense of ownership and an institutional base from which to participate in the system. Party leaders live with it because it keeps them out of the particularistic idiosyncrasies of individual constituency-level politics and thus gives them the freedom to define and pursue wider partisan interests.

Individual partisans may own their local candidates and representatives, but they have no effective means of directing them. When Members of Parliament go off to Ottawa, they come under the sway of the leadership and take their voting instructions from the parliamentary top of the party, not the grassroots bottom. Of course, unlike the case in many parliamentary systems, the franchise bargain of Canadian parties – local autonomy for parliamentary discipline – means that constituency partisans are relatively free to remove an MP whom they believe has not been representing them effectively. And there are cases of this happening in every election. Party leaders need not mind, for any new representative delivered from a riding will be subject to the same parliamentary discipline as the last. This separation between the opportunities for citizen participation and the practices of institutional representation proves, ultimately, to be an unsatisfactory way to engage in democratic politics. Some MPs simply leave after a short electoral career, depriving Parliament of much needed experience (Docherty 1997), and some voters abandon the parties in an effort to find a political alternative in one of the non-brokerage parties. And every few decades the dysfunctions and frustrations of such an unresponsive pattern of party politics grow so intense and so widespread that the whole system collapses, as it did in the 1920s, 1960s and 1990s.

In the dying days of the Chrétien government, Parliament passed a law (C-24) that was intended to reshape the financial and organizational bases of the country's national political parties. The law will do this by severely limiting the parties' access to money from corporate and trade union sources and replacing that money with substantial (and regular) subsidies from the state. Parties are being transformed from popular organizations through which active citizens can control the state, into centralized institutions, independent of their supporters and dependent on parliamentarians' willingness to give them access to the state's purse. In addition, this statute has broken the old franchise bargain that has structured local-centre relationships in Canadian parties for over a century. It gives party leaders much greater control over the local associations, which now must register annually with the state but need the leader's imprimatur to do so. This tilts the balance of power within the parties, to the considerable advantage of the leader, and threatens partisans' longstanding autonomy and authority within their own local associations.

This portrait of the dominant Canadian political parties shows clearly that they remain, as they have always been, the underdeveloped institutions of a political elite playing a highly personalized game of electoral politics; they are not the instruments of an engaged or even interested citizenry. Yet our constitutional theory assigns them a central place in our democratic politics. If, for many, the very existence of electoral competition between the parties, no matter their internal character and practices, was once suffi-

cient to guarantee a socio-political dynamic that values public participation and service, this is no longer the case. This leads us to consider the cast and consequence of the country's patterns of party competition.

Canadian Party Competition

> There can be few countries in the world in which elections arouse more fury and enthusiasm than in Canada.
>
> Andre Siegfried, 1906

Canada's elections, like its national game, have traditionally been hard-hitting contests between two teams more concerned with the moment than with its meaning or consequence. It could hardly be otherwise, given that two large brokerage parties dominate our politics and the logic of their existence focuses their ambitions on office rather than on policy or program. On occasion, national elections will be fought over seemingly major policy differences, but the alacrity with which parties are prepared to adopt policies they once enthusiastically denounced continues to amaze foreign observers. In our time, Chrétien's Liberals were as content to live with the trade and tax policies they had recently opposed as were Laurier and his colleagues a century earlier.[4]

The first-past-the-post electoral system, which privileges the imperatives of geography over other bases of popular mobilization, has been central to the persistence of this pattern. Based on a winner-take-all principle, and offering the prospect of single-party majorities, it rewards the vote-vacuuming strategies of brokerage parties and discriminates against those that seek to articulate and represent the clearly defined interests of a particular social group. Parties with a specifically regional appeal are the obvious exception, for the geographic bias of the electoral system often over-rewards them – as revealed by the parliamentary history of Social Credit (whether in its Alberta or its Quebec manifestation) or the current strength of the Bloc Québécois. Indeed, in rewarding regional electoral appeals, and thus strengthening the claims of the brokerage parties that they are needed to fight its disintegrative effects, the electoral system lies at the heart of a politics that gives priority to the claims of regionalism (Cairns 1968). And it surely impedes those who wish to engage in national politics on other terms.

Canada's politics of regionalized electoral competition has rendered large areas of the country uncompetitive for long periods. The impact of that pattern of politics is to deprive many citizens of real choice and to divest national competition among the brokerage parties of much of its dynamism and authority. Over much of the twentieth century, voters in Quebec and Alberta had little real electoral power, as the effective choices of their representatives were exercised in the unregulated and often highly manipulated private nomination practices of the parties. Decades of partisan dominance in Quebec led the Liberal Party in that province to confuse, and equate, its partisan interest with public service in the wider national interest. In Alberta, the consequence of the pattern of highly regionalized electoral competition has been the exclusion of its representatives from meaningful participation in government. On only three occasions since the introduction of universal suffrage in 1920 have a majority of Alberta's MPs sat in the House of Commons as part of a majority government. In this sense, Alberta has really been Canada's politically distinct society, and Albertans might rightly feel that their partisanship has excluded them from the process of defining national goals and programs.

This pattern of electoral competition has ultimately been both deceptive and destructive. Driven by parties determined to smother differences and conflicting interests, successive elections saw partisanly coloured regions gently rubbing up against one another like great tectonic plates. At any one moment, the political landscape looked little changed as the country lived through decades of highly predictable election outcomes that confirmed the position of the dominant "government party." But tectonic plates do not rub against each other indefinitely; the accumulating physical stresses eventually find an explosive outlet. And so it has been in Canadian political life, with a pattern of electoral competition that has allowed our regionally defined political stresses to continually build. The inevitable outcome has been a series of electoral earthquakes of a magnitude rarely seen in any other democratic system. In 1921, in 1958 and again in 1993, the carefully crafted political balances of the national party system proved unable to contain the country's internal tensions, and a massive electoral explosion shook and restructured the partisan landscape. It took most of a decade, after each of these political earthquakes, for the parties, and the party system, to rebuild, and for a new political equilibrium to assert itself. Each time, the political destruction stimulated the emergence of new patterns of partisanship, and with them new organizational frameworks to struc-

ture political life.[15]

Any shift in the partisan alignments of the electoral landscape inevitably alters the political balances underlying the governing equations that structure national power and participation. In the decades after the 1921 breakdown of the limited-suffrage, post-Confederation political world, Mackenzie King's Liberals established an easy hegemony and became the country's natural governing party. They did so by forging a political base that rested on the twin pillars of Quebec and prairie Saskatchewan (from 1921 to 1951 the country's third most populous province), supplemented by support in other regions. This was an era in which Canadian national party politics was essentially uncompetitive. The predictability of the pattern made it clear who was in and who was out and it provided a rigid partisan frame that ordered the modalities of citizenship.

By realigning the Prairies, the Diefenbaker revolution of 1958 fundamentally changed the competitive cast of Canadian electoral politics. Neither Quebec nor Alberta (newly emerged as the dominant Prairie province) became any more competitive, nor did their citizens get to choose most of their representatives in general elections,[16] but the system did offer the country as a whole the prospect of regular electoral change. The Liberals could win a majority if they could marry their Quebec base to Ontario; the Progressive Conservatives' prospects were dependent on a Prairie-Ontario partnership. So precariously balanced was this system that no party leader between the Liberal St. Laurent in the 1950s and the Conservative Mulroney in the 1980s was able to win a successive majority government. It was the most open, permeable and dynamic period of the century, one in which public service was fully opened to members of both linguistic communities, immigration shaped a new multicultural social fabric, and the Charter of Rights in a repatriated Constitution provided new avenues for engaging the system and established the courts as an alternative arbiter of the public good.

The temporary destruction of the Conservatives as a significant brokerage alternative to the Liberals in 1993 once more shattered the country's underlying electoral equations and reshuffled the patterns of local representation in Parliament. The party system again became uncompetitive, and the Liberal government seemed to go unchallenged as the party won four elections in a row. However, the basis for that dominance had changed. The party's success now rested on its easy and virtually complete command of Ontario, a province that had only once in three decades delivered half its votes to Mr. King. In a country where partisan politics had long rested upon carefully constructed and nurtured inter-regional balances and accommodations, this transformation of the Canadian party system marked the ultimate triumph of the centre over the regions.

In each of these periods, the essential partisan shape of the country changed. The shifting balance altered the partisan political terms that regulated access to power and hence the ability of individual Canadians to find a place in national political life through participation in a national party. What seemed to hardly change was the predominance of the Liberal Party, and so to it we must now turn.

The Liberals

> Even if the last century did not belong to Canada, Canada turns out to have belonged to the Liberal party.
>
> Stephen Clarkson, 2005

The Liberal Party of Canada has been one of the democratic world's most successful political parties, with a record of electoral victories matched by few others. This suggests that the party, and its leadership, may have been better than its Conservative opponents at brokering broad coalitions. But in this the Liberal Party was certainly helped by the electoral lock it put on Quebec during the First World War (in the 20 elections that followed, Quebec delivered more seats to the Liberals than the larger province of Ontario on all but four occasions) and the preference that English-speaking Roman Catholics have shown for the party (Blais 2005). Whatever the explanation for the Liberals' dominance, their long years in power meant that few could doubt that the principal route to government participation in Canada was through this party. Public service – at least government service – had a partisan colour.

For the Liberals, their continuing easy success exacted a heavy price. Long years in office turned partisan politicians into government administrators, and the party found itself being devoured by the state. With a depoliticized Liberal Party transformed into the electoral arm of the government of Canada, the politics of the dominant party became preoccupied with administrative issues rather than fundamental questions of political values and social mobilization (see Whitaker 1977). One became a Liberal activist as much to get ahead as to serve the public interest.

Of course, permanent government had its corollary

in permanent opposition. George Perlin (1980, 198-200) has written about the frustration, internal conflict and political ineffectiveness of the Progressive Conservatives, the result being domination by individuals with an "opposition mentality." To many, the very idea that one might make a contribution by participating in the opposition party must have seemed risible. Thus, rather than opening up alternative avenues to public life, partisanship of any colour became a constricting force in the system.

If the dominance of the Liberals has long been the defining reality of national political life in Canada, it is important to acknowledge how the party itself has changed over time. Its long, relentless series of electoral victories too easily obscures the ongoing transformation of the party, which reflected more deep-seated shifts in the party system and its underlying political ground. We have already noted the centralizing impact of the Chrétien government's party finance legislation. Two other changes are particularly important, and both served to dramatically shift the locus of access and influence in the party, and hence the country.

The first notable change was the continual shrinkage of the Liberal base: it just kept getting smaller. In Laurier's (pre-universal franchise) heyday, the party averaged over 47 percent of the vote, albeit in contests in which the only serious opponent it generally had to face was the Conservatives. Over the King-St. Laurent era, a period in which a series of minor parties appeared on the electoral map, the party's average national vote dropped a few points, to 44.6 percent, still sufficient to ensure majority governments. With the Diefenbaker realignment of western Canada, the party's vote share dropped again, so that during the Pearson-Trudeau era it averaged just 41.7 percent. That was never enough to guarantee single-party majorities, and under both leaders the party had to endure episodes of minority government. During the most recent period, the Chrétien-Martin era, the Liberal vote dropped even further, so that it averaged only 39.2 percent over the four elections following the 1993 political earthquake. At this level, the party is almost completely dependent on the vagaries of the electoral system to return it to office. Perhaps even more alarming, for Liberals and those concerned with government legitimacy, has been the simultaneous collapse of voter participation. With electoral turnout percentages now in the low 60s (of those registered), Liberal governments were being returned with the active electoral support of only about one-quarter of the electorate.

While the Liberal base has been steadily shrinking, the party's political coalition has also been increasingly narrowed. As a brokerage party, the face that it presents to the public, the voices heard in its senior counsels and the doors that it opened to influence are heavily structured by the makeup of its parliamentary caucus. And even a quick look at the changing cast of the Liberals' national caucus speaks to the impact on the party of the shifting balance of the regional basis of party competition and the emergence of Ontario as the linchpin of national electoral politics. During the King-St. Laurent era, when the Liberals still commanded comparatively high levels of support and effortlessly won majorities, Ontario MPs averaged just 24.8 percent of the party's House of Commons caucus. This proportion jumped to 36.5 percent during the more turbulent Pearson-Trudeau years when, as a harbinger of things to come, on three occasions Liberal MPs from Ontario outnumbered partisan colleagues from Quebec. The 1993 turn of the electoral wheel sharply accelerated this trend, leaving the Chrétien-Martin Liberal governments dominated by Ontario MPs: on average 58.5 percent of their caucuses came from that province.[17] At the beginning of the 21st century Canada may have still belonged to the Liberal Party, but the Liberals belonged to Ontario.

This restructuring of the party system, with its concomitant triumph of the centre in Canadian electoral politics, and the emergence of the Liberals as a smaller, narrower, but still governing party, went hand-in-hand. The result has been to leave Canadians trying to (or pretending to) practise brokerage politics without any genuine brokerage parties. At the same time, the single-member plurality electoral system that produces elected dictatorships continues to deny the logic of this pattern of partisanship and so misrepresents it in Parliament. This shrinks the prospect that the party system might be seen as an effective agency through which citizens might hope to make a contribution to the public life of their society.

A Party Country

> Parties are still among the few relatively genuine national forces in Canada.
>
> John Meisel, 1963

Canada is a county of regions – imperfectly balanced, unequally resourced and unevenly committed. It was put together, and then expanded over the subsequent decades, through a series of explicit-

ly political decisions made by working party politicians. As John Meisel has argued, one of the central tasks demanded of the political parties has been to keep the country together and make it work. In this sense Canada is, unlike most countries, a party country in which the role and activities of a set of healthy, competitive political parties is central to its continuing existence. Thus partisanship might be expected to be a vital part of citizens' political identity, and the party a principal route to democratic public participation and service. But however much this is so, the stark reality is that most Canadians no longer like, trust or join national political parties; they do not believe the party system offers them a tool for choosing or influencing their national government.

The dominant Liberal Party – the so-called national party – has become *narrower, smaller* and more *centralized*. Its long occupancy of power has led it to confuse partisanship with patriotism and has created a cult of entitlement that repels citizens from engaging in public service rather than inviting them to do so. Its failure to build a coherent, participatory membership organization leaves it politically vulnerable and forces it, when challenged, to resort to using the resources of the state for narrowly partisan purposes.[18] Ultimately, this not only threatens to delegitimize public life but also reverses the natural relationship between citizen and state in a democracy.

With the political ascendancy of the centre province (itself increasingly driven by its own metropolitan centre), the party system no longer seems able to strike acceptable accommodations capable of balancing competing regional interests. For those in the centre who win, partisan contests may no longer seem relevant to the process of acceptable collective decision-making. For those on the peripheries, partisanship, and the party activity it supports, are more likely to lock them out than offer them an entry portal into meaningful public involvement. Whether the revival of the Conservatives as a viable brokerage alternative can undo this syndrome is still very much an open question. The Diefenbaker and Mulroney experiences are not encouraging.

This failure of the major political parties, and hence the party system, to serve as the primary vehicle for public service is profoundly troubling for a party country. Which brings us back to Premier Campbell and his colleagues, who appear to have decided that one of the principal institutional underpinnings of our current political malaise – described in terms of a democratic deficit – is the geographically structured electoral system. Their provincial reform processes, functioning independently of one another, have produced sharply different proposals for changing their respective electoral systems. Though all the current reform proposals call for some form of proportional representation, they would result in distinctly different patterns of party competition managed by political parties working very differently (Carty 2006). But a set of provincial-level reform experiments may teach us much about the consequences, for the organization and activities of Canadian parties, of changing the electoral system.

One predictable result of adopting those reforms would be fragmentation of the respective party systems, making single-party majority governments far less common. While that might well alter the governing dynamics of individual provinces, it would certainly have consequences for the character and functioning of Canadian federalism as it has developed over the last half century. With first ministers no longer sure about their ability to commit their governments and legislatures, the practices of executive federalism would be undermined and new modalities for decision-making and public administration that cross jurisdictional lines would have to be created. In an earlier era, the Liberal Party managed this through a network of regional bosses (see Whitaker 1977). However, with the subsequent separation of national and provincial party organizations, and the transformation of the national parties themselves, there is little prospect that the political parties are still capable of serving as instruments of intergovernmental integration.

National electoral reform poses a distinctive set of challenges that need to be carefully thought out. As in the provinces, a proportional electoral system would likely lead to some fragmentation of the party system. There would undoubtedly be more small parties represented in Parliament (and fairer representation of some of those already there), but the large parties might themselves break into pieces. Whether the current Conservative or Liberal Party could hold together under a proportional regime is an important question. A case might be made for the proposition that, but for the first-past-the-post electoral system, they would succumb to the disintegrating effects of regionalism. After all, its imperatives were among the most powerful forces pushing the Alliance and Conservative pieces of the old Progressive Conservative Party back together. If national brokerage is desirable as the naturally Canadian way to do

party politics, then electoral reform must be assessed in terms of its capacity to support and sustain the political parties that are able to engage in it (Courtney 1999, 2004).

Over time, the country's political dynamics have left its major governing party narrower, smaller and more centralized. Proportional national electoral reform seems likely to reinforce those tendencies and exaggerate the difficulties faced by political parties striving to practise brokerage politics. If the real challenge is to find a way to restore this kind of national political party, then electoral reform would be counterproductive. If, on the other hand, the evolution of our parties leads us to conclude that old-style national brokerage parties are now a thing of the past, then electoral reform offers a way to usher in the new party organizations that will reshape the competitive alignments necessary to allow Canadians to participate in a new, democratic national public life.

Notes

This essay was written before the fall of the Martin Liberal government and its subsequent defeat, which put the Liberals out of office for the first time since 1993.

1 For an account (with excerpts) of the debate in the legislature authorizing the Assembly, see "The British Columbia Citizens' Assembly: A Round Table" (2003). *The full debate can be found in the British Columbia Hansard* for April 30, 2003.

2 The referendum was held at the same time as the provincial general election, on May 17, 2005. It was supported by 57.7 percent of the electorate and by at least 50 percent of voters in 77 of the 79 provincial electoral districts. The legislature had previously set a double threshold of 60 percent support and a majority in 60 percent of the districts, so the referendum was deemed to have failed. In light of public support for electoral change, the newly re-elected Campbell government announced its intention, in its Speech from the Throne on September 12, 2005, to hold another referendum on the same proposal. The second referendum is to be supported by funds for information campaigns and will include an electoral map delineating a set of electoral boundaries for the proposed alternative system.

3 The proposal to shift to a mixed proportional type of electoral system was defeated in an uncharacteristically low turnout of about 33 percent on November 28, 2005. Precise turnout figures are unavailable as no enumeration to prepare an up-to-date voters' list was conducted. For an account of the conduct of the plebiscite, including the government's decision to alter the threshold for change during the campaign, see Lee (2006).

4 The Commission's comprehensive report can be found at www.gnb.ca/0100/FinalReport-e.pdf

5 The Draft Bill can be found at http://www.assnat.qc.ca/eng/37legislature2/Av-projets/04-aAVPL_LE.htm. Consideration of the bill includes work by a committee of citizens specially appointed to supplement the work of the committee of the National Assembly.

6 The Assembly is to start meeting in the fall of 2006. For further information, see the Web site of the Democratic Renewal Secretariat: http://www.democraticrenewal.gov.on.ca/english

7 Examples include, in the world of established democracies, the United Kingdom, Italy, New Zealand and Japan; most of the countries of the former Soviet-dominated Eastern Europe; and a range of Third World nations as they struggle to establish democratic electoral politics.

8 The Liberal Party's 1921 election platform included a call for the adoption of proportional representation. The House debated the electoral system in 1922 but voted to maintain it.

9 A full account and documentation of the Assembly's work, and its final report, can be found at www.citizensassembly.bc.ca. Mark Warren and Hilary Pearse (forthcoming) provide a sophisticated multi-perspective analysis of the Assembly experience.

10 For descriptive accounts of the Assembly's work, see Ratner (2004, 2005).

11 The Law Commission of Canada's (2004) report *Voting Counts: Electoral Reform for Canada* can be found at http://www.lcc.gc.ca/about/voting_toc-en.asp. There have been second thoughts about the system in Wales, and the Commission on the Powers and Electoral Arrangements of the National Assembly for Wales (Richard Commission) has recommended it be abandoned for a Single Transferable Vote electoral system. Its report can be found at www.richardcommission.gov.uk/content/template.asp?ID=/index.asp

12 In a survey of Assembly members we conducted before they met, 65.8 percent agreed that politicians soon lost touch with their electors and just 31.6 percent thought the British Columbia party system provided clear issue choices; 68.4 percent believed outcomes should be proportional, only 8.1 percent thought it acceptable that a party with less than a majority of the vote should get a majority of the seats, and 60.4 percent agreed with the proposition that parties are necessary for democracy. We surveyed them after the Assembly survey and found little substantial change on any of these basic questions.

13 The social democrats (as the Co-operative Commonwealth Federation or the New Democratic Party) have survived longest by trying to establish themselves as a national party, but in doing so have paid a high seat-vote price.

14 Of course, the Liberals have not been alone in this. The Mulroney Progressive Conservative government enthusiastically adopted North American free trade economic policies in the 1980s despite the party's century-long opposition to it.

15 My original statement of this perspective on the development of the Canadian party system can be found in Carty (1988) and is elaborated in various ways in Carty (1995, 1997) and Carty, Cross, and Young (2000).

16 Most MPs from these two provinces knew that the real competition for their seat was focused on winning their party's local nomination – Liberal in Quebec, Progressive Conservative in Alberta.

17 Ontario's share of the Commons varied very little over the century, oscillating between 32 and 34 percent.

18 On the limits of Canadian party organization, see Carty and Cross (Forthcoming). The Commission of Inquiry into the Sponsorship Program and Advertising Activities (the Gomery Inquiry) provides much evidence of the Liberal's willingness to use state resources for partisan electoral aims.

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Are Canadian Political Parties Empty Vessels?

Membership, Engagement and Policy Capacity

William Cross and Lisa Young

Introduction

In the period just after Confederation, the notion that membership or involvement in a Canadian political party was a form of public service would have been considered quite peculiar. More accurate would have been the idea that activism on behalf of a political party was a route into the public service, as civil service jobs were awarded to the loyal supporters of the governing party. In the contemporary era, with fewer opportunities for political parties to dispense patronage, it is more plausible to think about party membership as a form of public service, as most party members are volunteers motivated by a desire to play a role in political life.

In fact, drawing on the Study of Canadian Political Party Members, our 2000 survey of members of what were then Canada's five major political parties,[1] we find that individuals are drawn to party membership not by a desire to further their personal interests but rather by support for their party's policy stance and as participants in intraparty personnel contests. This conforms to a notion of public service as volunteerism motivated by a desire to participate in or influence discussions of public policy and party affairs. Volunteers have traditionally played a significant role in Canadian political parties, as campaign workers, supporters of candidates for party leadership or nomination, and local organizers. In the contemporary era of professionalized, media-oriented politics, however, the already circumscribed role of the Canadian party member has been limited even further. In our survey, we found that party members are not satisfied with their ability to shape party policy and are particularly resentful of the extent to which political professionals have usurped the role of the party member.

To the extent that party membership in Canada is a form of public service and thus contributes to the vibrancy of political life in the country, we should be concerned that the rates of party membership appear to be dropping, the average party member is nearing retirement age and is not being replaced, and rates of activism within parties are relatively low. All of these tendencies are products of complex social change,

reinforced by institutional constraints that have historically limited the role of Canadian party members. As such, they defy easy solutions. We argue, however, that one approach that might encourage party membership and help political parties to fulfill their roles in public life would be to encourage parties to develop policy foundations.

Parties without Members – The Comparative Context

Studies of political party organization and membership in Western Europe and North America in recent years point to significant changes in party organization, driven by declining rates of membership in political parties. The most notable of these studies is a book entitled *Parties Without Partisans* (Dalton and Wattenberg 2000), the title of which telegraphs a key concern about the development of party organization in these established democracies. The consensus among political scientists who study political parties in established democracies is that rates of party membership have declined over the past three or four decades (Scarrow 2000; Norris 2002; Heidar and Saglie 2003). The extent of the decline and the rate at which it has occurred vary by country, but the overall trend is in a downward direction. Moreover, rates of activism tend to be very low, and in many cases declining, among party members in these industrialized democracies (Scarrow 2000; Norris 2002; Heidar and Saglie 2003; Gallagher and Marsh 2002; Whiteley and Seyd 2002).

Although these findings have profound implications for the role of political parties in modern democracies, they must be placed in context. When measuring numbers of party members or the rate of party membership in the electorate, the initial basis for comparison is usually the 1950s or 1960s. Susan Scarrow (2000, 94-5) points out that "it was only in the 1950s and 1960s that many countries had parties of both the left and the right successfully pursuing mass enrolment strategies. Before and after this period, parties exhibited an uneven pattern of commitment to, and success in, enlisting supporters in permanent organizations." As Scarrow points out, the period from the Second World War until the 1970s was a historical anomaly, with unusually high rates of membership. Using this time as a basis for comparison overstates the magnitude of the decline.

Even if the decline in rates of party membership is somewhat exaggerated by the basis for comparison, there remains the question of why membership rates began to fall after reaching these unprecedented highs in the postwar era. Norris's (2002) cross-national analysis makes it clear that this is a phenomenon of affluent established democracies; in fact, she finds that affluent countries generally have lower rates of party membership than other democracies. This finding lends general support to the modernization thesis, which holds that various aspects of the modern social and political order in advanced industrialized nations lead to a weakening of the bond between the public and political parties (Dalton and Wattenberg 2000, 10-11).

More specifically, the modernization thesis suggests that increases in education, changing values held by citizens, changing modes of social organization, the rise of the mass media, tendencies toward professionalization and changes in technology all combine to weaken citizens' attachment to political parties and to discourage membership in party organizations. At the level of the individual citizen, higher rates of education result in "cognitive mobilization" of citizens. With greater intellectual resources at their disposal, these individuals become self-sufficient political actors who are less deferential to political elites and less inclined to look to elites for political cues, opting instead to make their own choices (Dalton and Wattenberg 2000, 10-11). More complex patterns of social organization, when combined with this cognitive mobility, reduce the basis for group mobilization. Individuals in these postindustrial societies are less inclined to identify themselves as members of a social group – such as the working class – and are consequently less available to be mobilized as group members. Overall, these individual-level changes result in a smaller supply of individuals who can be mobilized to partisan activity.

Aspects of social organization in modern societies also contribute to declining membership in political parties. In particular, the rise of the electronic mass media supplants the role of party members in spreading the party's message, and the rise of public opinion polling reduces party leaders' need to gather information about the mood of the electorate from party members. Norris (2002) finds empirical evidence for this assertion. In her cross-national analysis, she finds that rates of party membership are lower in countries that have a high rate of ownership of television sets. From this, she concludes that the electronic broadcast media act as a substitute for party mobilization in established democracies. Parties communicate with voters not

through volunteers who spread the word but via carefully crafted television advertisements.

Along with the rise of electronic media and opinion polling comes a professionalization of parties, in which fundraisers, pollsters and communication consultants come to fill the functions that were once the preserve of members of political parties. As a consequence, the conduct of politics goes from a labour-intensive undertaking in which volunteer labour was a necessity for an electorally competitive party, to a capital-intensive activity in which money, rather than volunteer labour, is essential to electoral success. In essence, technological changes have reduced parties' demand for active members in these affluent, established democracies.

Given these trends, it would be reasonable to predict that political parties may one day become organizations without members. If party leaders do not need members to run election campaigns, maintain party organization and serve as informational conduits between the electorate and the party leadership, then why should they continue to recruit party members? In considering this question, it becomes clear that party members serve functions other than those listed above. First, parties gain legitimacy from their membership; if they are not able to point to some membership base, they may lose credibility in the eyes of the electorate. The existence of a membership base lends an air of legitimacy to decisions made by the party, not the least of which are the selection of a leader and the choice of candidates for legislative office. Second, members can be important assets in intraparty battles (Scarrow 2002, 100). As long as party constitutions give party members a voice in selecting party leaders, there will be an incentive for aspirants to mobilize members into the party to support their quest for the leadership.

This raises the question of how parties can recruit new members from the cognitively mobile and atomized societies that we find in most established democracies. Comparative studies show that parties have responded to this challenge in large part by moving in the direction of "plebiscitary" party organization, in which members are accorded direct votes in the selection of party leaders and on selected matters of party policy and direction (Scarrow 1999; Seyd 1999; Whiteley and Seyd 2002, 213). In their research in Britain, Whiteley and Seyd (2002) conclude that such techniques may increase the size of a party's membership but do not increase the rate of activism within the party.

A strategy that parties facing such challenges often adopt is to turn to the state for financial support that allows them to purchase the services of professionals to maintain party organization (Katz and Mair 1995; van Biezen 2004). Increasingly, political parties are portrayed in both academic and political discourse as "public utilities" that perform services that are necessary to electoral democracy and that must be supported financially by the state. Certainly, with the advent of quarterly funding for Canadian political parties at the federal level, we can see that Canadian parties have, to varying degrees, adopted this strategy (Young et al. 2005). If state funding reduces a party's need to maintain an active base of members and supporters, it may exacerbate tendencies toward party organization in which members play a minimal role.

Party Membership in Canada: An Overview

How does Canada fit into this picture of declining party memberships? On one hand, there is little evidence that rates of membership in Canadian parties have declined substantially. In her comparative analysis, Scarrow (2000, 88) observes that the United States and Canada "do not support the picture of 'decline,' though they do match the picture of contemporary parties as lacking strong membership bases." In essence, the golden era of the mass membership party never dawned in Canada.

Few Canadians choose to belong to political parties on an ongoing basis. An Institute for Research on Public Policy study by Howe and Northrup (2000, 89) found that 16 percent of respondents claim to have belonged to a political party at some point in their lives. This figure probably includes a significant number of "partisans" of a party who have never formally held membership. Our best estimate, from an examination of membership patterns over time, is that between 1 and 2 percent of Canadians belong to a political party on a year-to-year basis. This places Canada at the bottom of the list of Western democracies.

Moreover, Canadian party members are much older than the general population. In our survey, we found that the average age of party members was 59. Almost half our respondents were senior citizens, and only one in 20 was under age 30. Some of this age distortion may be explained by respondent bias, as seniors are more likely to participate in mail surveys than are their younger counterparts. However, this factor alone cannot explain the degree to which Canadian political

party membership appears to be "greying." Similar findings are reported in a study conducted by the IRPP in 2000, which found that only 5 percent of Canadians aged 18 to 30 have ever belonged to a political party (either federal or provincial), compared with one-third of those over age 60 (Howe and Northrup 2000). The same question was asked in a survey conducted in 1990; at that time, 10 percent of respondents aged 18 to 30 reported having belonged to a party. This decline over time in the rate of party membership among youth lends some credence to the idea that Canadian political parties, as membership organizations, are in decline.

No Canadian political party has achieved the kind of mass membership enrolment that characterized mass parties of the mid-twentieth century. The Co-operative Commonwealth Federation (CCF) and then the New Democratic Party (NDP) represented an effort to build a mass-type party in Canada, but neither party was able to achieve the kind of social encapsulation that leftist parties in Western Europe achieved. This may in part reflect the limited salience of class identities in the Canadian context, but it is also a product of the unique circumstances of Canadian political parties. R.K. Carty (2002, 729) notes that Canadian parties must accommodate differences among diverse and shifting coalitions of supporters, and have "little in the way of the material or ideational glue that traditionally holds political parties together." As a consequence, "the conventional model of a centralized, disciplined mass membership party, speaking with one voice, and committed to offering and delivering an integrated and coherent set of public policies has never been the way to do this successfully" in the Canadian experience (Carty 2002).

Although the Canadian party system did not experience the full effects of the rise of the mass party in the mid-twentieth century, the formation of the NDP and changing expectations about internal democracy did provide a stimulus for the two traditional brokerage parties to increase the influence of their members. During the 1960s and 1970s, the grassroots party memberships gained greater influence over the selection of the party leader, gained the power to oust a party leader and won some influence over setting party policy (see Carty, Cross, and Young 2000, 110-11). As a result of these developments, the traditional influence of Canadian party members at the local level, especially in controlling local party affairs and selecting candidates, was enhanced by a new influence over the selection of the leader at the national level.

Members' entitlements to vote in local nomination contests and in national leadership contests are the two significant entitlements that accompany membership in a Canadian political party. It is not surprising, then, that levels of membership in Canadian political parties follow a cyclical pattern. The number of members who belong to each party can double or even triple in election years and in years when the party is selecting a leader. Table 1 shows the dramatic increase in Liberal Party membership in each of the four largest provinces in the run-up to its 2003 leadership vote. Candidates seeking either the party's nomination or its leadership mobilize supporters into the party, bolstering the membership ranks. However, after the contest is over, many of these individuals drop out of the party, leaving the stalwarts who maintain the party organization between elections. The vast majority of these members take no further part in party activities. This cyclical pattern suggests that voters are willing to join a party when they see some value offered in exchange for their taking out membership: a vote in the party's leadership or nomination contest. When these contests are not imminent, however, these individuals let their membership lapse.

This raises the important question of why voters who are open to the possibility of participating in party politics will not maintain ongoing memberships. We suggest that the answer to this question is, at least in part, that voters do not see membership in political parties as a way of influencing the country's politics (aside from personnel selection). The Howe and Northrup survey (2000) offers some evidence of this. They find that, by a three-to-one margin, Canadians believe that belonging to an interest group is a more effective way of influencing public policy than is participation in a political party. This public perception is not erroneous, as even the parties' core group of consistent members are largely dissatisfied with the role they play in ongoing party decision-making. (We discuss this in some detail below.)

Table 1
Number of Members of the Liberal Party of Canada in the Four Largest Provinces, 2002 and 2003

	2002	2003	% increase
Ontario	38,000	126,000	232
Quebec	28,000	65,000	132
British Columbia	4,500	38,000	744
Alberta	4,000	22,000	450

Source: R. Kenneth Carty and William Cross, "Can Stratarchically Organized Parties Be Democratic: The Canadian Case," *Journal of Elections, Public Opinion and Parties* 2006, 16 (2): 93-114, 103.

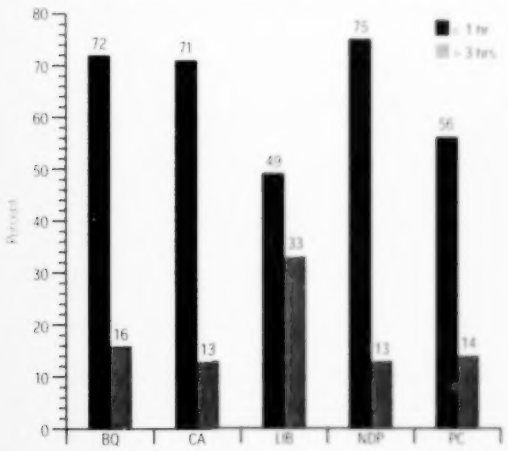
The cyclical pattern of membership numbers suggests that party members remain a valued resource for party leaders in intraparty contests. The same modernizing factors that have decreased party leaders' demand for party members in other industrialized democracies are also at work in Canada, however. Canadian political parties have availed themselves of the services of opinion pollsters for checking the public mood, and use television and other electronic media as their primary means of communicating with voters. Canadian parties have become professionalized organizations in which volunteer labour is simply less necessary than it once was. In short, members remain valuable to Canadian parties primarily as a source of public legitimacy and as a resource in intraparty contests.

When we examine organizational changes in the major political parties over recent decades, we find clear signals that parties continue to seek members as a source of legitimacy. Led by the Reform Party/Canadian Alliance, Canadian parties have shifted their organizational modes in the direction of plebiscitary models of internal party democracy (Young and Cross 2002b). The clearest manifestations of this are the move to give every party member a direct vote in the selection of party leader, the moves of three of the major parties (the Canadian Alliance, the Progressive Conservatives and the Bloc Québécois) away from decentralized forms of party membership in favour of a national party list and the occasional use of referendums within parties on crucial policy issues (see Carty, Cross and Young 2000, chap. 6). The move toward plebiscitary democracy in Canadian parties had its greatest momentum in the 1990s, but the majority of reforms implemented during this period remain in place. While the merits and the success of these initiatives are subject to debate, their existence is a clear sign that the leaders of Canadian parties continue to see a value in trying to recruit and retain party members outside of leadership contests.

Not only do few Canadians belong to parties, but those who do are not particularly active. Our data, collected during a non-mobilization period when we suspect only the most stalwart of party supporters maintained their memberships, indicate that fewer than half of these party members engage in ongoing party activity. Our survey shows that 4 in 10 members report spending no time on party activity in a typical month, and an additional 2 in 10 commit less than one hour per month. As shown in figure 1, we found significant variance among the parties in this regard, with the Liberal and Progressive Conservative parties having fewer members who are disengaged from party activity than do the newer parties. This may be a governing party effect with activists more likely to participate in a party that has access to the levers of government and the accompanying patronage powers.

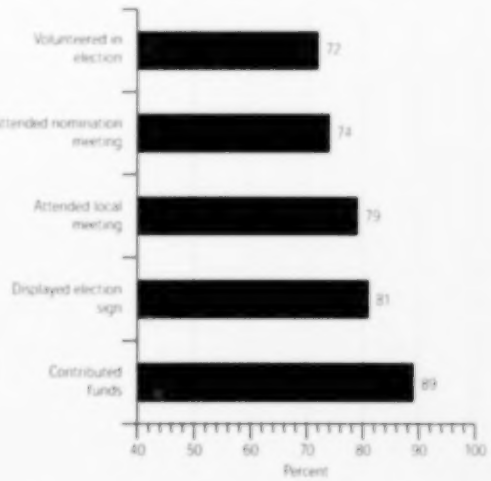
Similarly, 4 members in 10 report not having attended a single party meeting during the past year, and fewer than 4 in 10 attended more than two meetings. And, as illustrated in figure 2, almost one-quarter of members report that they have never attended a meeting of their local party association or volunteered

Figure 1
Proportion of Members Participating in Party Activity in a Typical Month, Canada, 2000 (percent)



Source: "Study of Canadian Political Party Members," 2000.
Note: The figures for the Liberal Party exclude respondents from Quebec to correct for a sampling problem in that province.

Figure 2
Proportion of Members Who Have "Ever" Participated in Party Activities, Canada, 2000 (percent)



Source: "Study of Canadian Political Party Members," 2000.

in an election campaign. While participation rates of 75 percent may seem high, it must be kept in mind that the question asked of members was whether they had "ever" done each of the activities, and also that the population being surveyed was the stalwart (interelection) party members. On the other hand, 9 in 10 members report having contributed funds to the party. Many then appear to be what we might call "chequebook" members, willing to contribute funds to the party but not active in party affairs in any way that may be thought of as akin to public service.

Why Do Canadians Join Political Parties?

Theoretical accounts suggest three categories of motivation for belonging to a political party (Young and Cross 2002a). The first category – material incentives – harkens back to the post-Confederation era of Canadian politics, when patronage provided ample incentive for membership. The broad category of material incentives includes patronage appointments and government contracts as well as more general inducements like career advancement. The second category – social incentives – offers potential participants the company of like-minded individuals and social or recreational opportunities. The third category – collective or purposive incentives – gives individuals an opportunity to assist in achieving the party's collective policy or ideological goals.

In most but by no means all industrialized democracies, material and social incentives have declined in importance over time. Civil service reforms and changing political values have reduced the practice of patronage, thereby reducing the parties' ability to offer material incentives to potential members. As recreational opportunities have expanded and the bases of social organization on which mass parties were formed have eroded, parties have been less able to offer social incentives to membership (Ware 1996). This leaves the category of collective incentives as the primary set of motivators for partisan involvement.

If membership in a political party is a form of collective action, then it is subject to what Olson (1965) identified as the "free rider problem." Olson argues that people have no incentive to participate in political action if they can benefit from the outcome without joining in the mobilization. "Free riders" are individuals who enjoy the benefits of a mobilization without participating in the campaign. In the context of political party activism, the question is this: If party involvement provides only collective benefits, what incentive does an individual have to join a political party?

Although there have been no comprehensive studies of the motivations for Canadians to join political parties, much of the literature suggests that supporting a candidate for the leadership of the party or for the party's nomination in an electoral district is seen as one of the significant reasons for joining a party. In his study of Canadian parties' constituency associations, Carty (1991, 38) found clear evidence that the Liberal and Progressive Conservative parties' membership numbers fluctuated vastly between election years and non-election years, leading him to conclude that "when party elections are to be held – to nominate a candidate in an election, or select delegates for a leadership contest – membership takes on its meaning and worth, and individuals are mobilized for these contests with little concern for longer-term involvement or participation." This pattern did not hold for the NDP, which Carty found to have a more stable pattern of party membership.

In their study of members of the Reform Party in 1993, Clarke et al. (2000) found that collective incentives most commonly motivated party membership. When members were asked what was their *most* important reason for joining the party, the most frequent responses were concern with the deficit or economic problems (31 percent), concern with moral principles in government (29 percent), dissatisfaction with the then-governing Progressive Conservative Party (22 percent), concern that the province of Quebec was too powerful (17 percent), and a desire for individual freedom and less government (16 percent). A mere 2 percent of respondents cited material incentives, either business contacts or a desire to run for public office, as their most important reason, and only 1 percent indicated that their primary motivation was that friends or family are party members. Respondents were not asked whether supporting a candidate for the party's nomination or leadership was a factor in their decision.

Recruitment

To what extent are individuals recruited into Canadian political parties, and to what extent do they take the initiative to join the party? Table 2 below summarizes responses to the question "Who first asked you to join the ___ party?" It is clear that, at least among the long-term or core members of the five parties who responded to our survey, the majority were not recruited into party activity but rather took

the initiative to join the party themselves. This pattern is all the more evident in the two newest parties – the Bloc and the Canadian Alliance – in which 68 percent and 71 percent of members, respectively, joined of their own initiative.

Incentives to membership

These patterns of recruitment suggest that conventional understanding of the importance of social networks and participation in leadership and nomination contests to joining Canadian political parties may be overstated and of limited salience in explaining membership in the more ideologically oriented parties. To determine this with greater certainty, however, we need to examine party members' reasons for initially joining their party. Respondents were given a list of eight reasons for joining the party and were asked to rank each one as not at all important, somewhat important or very important. Responses were not mutually exclusive.

As table 3 demonstrates, belief in the party's policies is the reason for joining given the greatest weight by party members. Fully 84 percent of respondents to the survey indicated that this reason was very important to them. Although important, support for a candidate for the party's leadership or nomination lagged far behind policy as a reason for initially joining the party. Of course, if we were to add the 45 percent of respondents who indicated that supporting a candidate for the local nomination was very important to the 36 percent of respondents who indicated that supporting an individual for the party's leadership was very important, this would suggest that these personnel-related concerns were as important as belief in the party's policies. However, on closer examination we find that these are for the most part the same respondents: 72 percent of respondents who indicated that supporting a candidate for the leadership was a very important reason for joining the party also indicated that supporting a candidate for the nomination was very important. That belief in the party's policies outweighs personnel-related reasons for joining suggests that even though Canadian parties have recruited a substantial portion of their members

Table 2
Who First Asked the Member to Join the Party, Canada, 2000 (percentage of members)

	All parties	PC	Liberal	NDP	BQ	CA
No one; own initiative	59	59	47	51	68	71
A relative	11	14	14	11	7	7
A friend or neighbour	9	5	12	9	3	10
A candidate for party's nomination	6	8	10	6	5	2
A local party officer	6	5	6	8	8	5
A member of Parliament	2	2	4	1	3	1
A co-worker	2	1	2	4	1	1
A candidate for the party's leadership	2	3	2	1	2	1
A group or association	1	0	1	4	2	1
National party headquarters	1	0	0	1	2	0
Other	2	2	1	5	1	1

Source: "Study of Canadian Political Party Members," 2000.
Note: Columns may not add up to 100 because of rounding.

Table 3
Reasons for Joining a Party, Canada, 2000 (percentage of members)[1]

	Not at all important	Somewhat important	Very important
I believe in the party's policies	3	14	84
To support a candidate for the local nomination	28	27	45
To support a candidate for the party's leadership	38	26	36
I wanted to influence party policy on a particular issue	44	37	19
A family member asked me to	81	12	7
A friend asked me to	81	13	6
I thought it would help my career	88	9	4
I thought it would help me get a government job	95	3	2

Source: "Study of Canadian Political Party Members," 2000.
Note: Rows may not add up to 100 because of rounding.
[1] The survey question was: "We are interested in knowing your reasons for originally joining the ____ party. Please indicate whether each of the following reasons was not at all important, somewhat important or very important to you."

through such routes, the individuals recruited for the most part feel some attraction to the party's ideological stance and are not merely joining in order to support an individual.

Contrary to expectations that a substantial portion of party members are recruited by friends or relatives, only 6 and 7 percent of respondents, respectively, indicated these as very important reasons. However, recruitment through a social network is related to support for a candidate for the nomination. Among respondents for whom recruitment by a friend was very important, 65 percent indicated that supporting a candidate for the nomination was also very important; similarly, among respondents for whom recruitment by a family member was very important, 60 percent indicated that supporting a candidate for the nomination was very important. To the extent that recruitment through social networks occurs, then, it appears closely tied to recruitment for nomination campaigns.

Finally, the very low percentages of respondents indicating that they initially joined the party for material reasons – to help their career or get a government job – indicate that material incentives have very little power to attract individuals to Canadian political parties. This is not particularly surprising, given the relative absence of patronage or other such inducements available to Canadian parties.

In short, these findings support the notion that party membership in Canada is for the most part motivated by a sense of public service. Relatively few members join political parties in the hope of furthering their careers or getting a government job, whereas many are motivated by support for their party's policy stance. This signals a desire to influence public policy, which is precisely the public service that we expect political parties to perform.

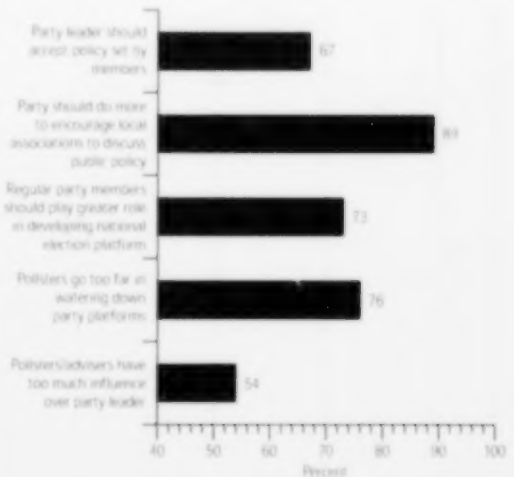
Are Party Members Satisfied with Their Role?

Members of Canadian political parties are largely dissatisfied with the role they are accorded in the development of party policy. As figure 3 shows, a majority of members of the five parties believe that members should have greater influence over party policy, while pollsters and advisers should have less. When given a choice between the statements "The party leader should have the freedom to set party policy" and "The leader should accept policy set by members," two-thirds of respondents chose the latter statement. While the results varied somewhat by party, a majority of members in each of the five parties favoured the idea that the leader should accept policy set by members. It is not surprising, then, that the vast majority of members agreed with statements to the effect that the party should do more to encourage local associations to discuss public policy, or that regular members should play a greater role in determining their party's national platform. In each of the five parties, including the populist Canadian Alliance, a sizable majority of members agreed with the latter statement.

The data presented in figures 3 and 4 suggest that party members are acutely aware that their traditional functions have been usurped by professionals. A majority of members of each party agree that these political professionals have too much influence over the party leader, and that this influence is used to water down the party's platform. Figure 4 demonstrates party members' perceptions of which groups lack influence and which have too much influence. Party members perceive that ordinary members and riding associations are the most severely lacking in influence, while they believe that pollsters exert too much influence.

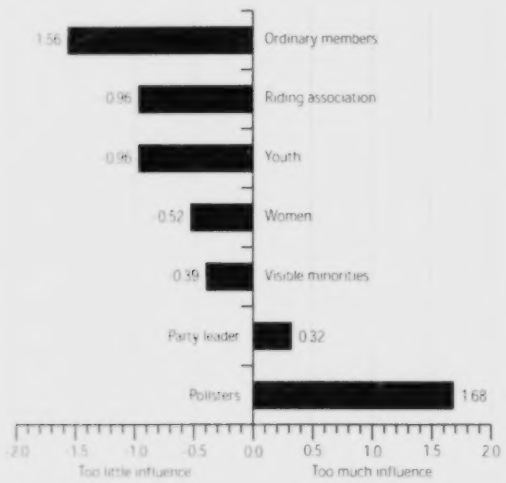
From this analysis, it is evident that members of Canadian political parties are far from content with their role in the party. Keeping in mind that the party members surveyed are those who renew their

Figure 3
Members' Views on Policy Development (Proportion Who Agree or Strongly Agree with the Statement), Canada, 2000 (percent)



Source: "Study of Canadian Political Party Members," 2000.

Figure 4
Members' Perceptions of the Influence of Certain Groups, Canada, 2000



Source: "Study of Canadian Political Party Members," 2000.
Note: The differential is calculated for each respondent by measuring on a 7-point scale how much influence the respondent believes the group has, and then subtracting from that figure the score on a seven-point scale of how much influence the respondent believes the group should have. Negative numbers mean the respondent believes the group does not have enough influence and positive numbers mean the respondent believes the group has too much influence.

membership in non-election, nonleadership-contest years, the analysis leads us to believe that contemporary Canadian political parties are ill equipped to offer inducements to membership adequate to engage significant numbers of Canadians.

Engaging Party Members

Our story to this point is one of political parties with few engaged members who are generally dissatisfied with their role in party life. In considering how our political parties might reinvigorate themselves, there are several points that are central to our investigation. The first is that while Canadians' satisfaction with their parties' performances can be judged to be only middling at best, they have not given up the belief that parties are central to successful democratic practice. When Canadians were asked to score the parties on a scale of 1 to 100, their mean ranking declined by almost 50 percent between 1968 and 2000. However, at the same time, 7 in 10 Canadians agree with the statement that "without parties, there can't be true democracy" (Blais and Gidengil 1991, 20).

Consistent with this, there is concrete, on-the-ground evidence that Canadians have not completely turned their backs on party politics. As discussed above, when parties offer grassroots voters a meaningful role in important decision-making, Canadians have shown a willingness to participate. This is evidenced by the dramatic increase in member recruitment during periods of candidate nomination and leadership selection. These personnel decisions have traditionally been left to the parties' members. Knowing that their participation determines the outcomes of these contests, thousands of Canadians who otherwise shun participation in political parties are enticed to join them. However, we also know that the large majority of these recruited members do not maintain an active presence in the party between personnel recruitment contests. We cannot know for certain why individuals drop out of active party life, but we do know that those who remain are generally dissatisfied with the decision-making role afforded them. Put simply, they see decision-making power between elections concentrated at the centre with little substantive role for grassroots members.

Too often, local party branches are ignored by the central offices and allowed to atrophy between elections. Indeed, the central offices themselves often suffer dramatic decreases in budget and staff between elections, reducing their ability to invigorate the party membership. The party in office dominates during these periods at the expense of input from the extraparliamentary membership. The elected party needs the membership party to wage successful election campaigns and to support personal ambitions in intraparty contests but finds little use for them otherwise. As we have argued elsewhere, this is part of a trade-off in which the extraparliamentary members are given control over personnel recruitment in return for the elected party having near unchallenged authority in setting a policy direction (Carty, Cross and Young 2000, 155-6).

We suggest that if parties are to attract more Canadians as members and, more important, as ongoing participants in their affairs, they need to offer voters more extensive opportunities to influence party stances on questions of public policy. Along with providing voters with an incentive to participate in party affairs, this would provide real benefits to the parties themselves.

There are defensible reasons why Canada's traditional parties have not regularly provided their members with a meaningful role in determining party policy. The principal rationale reflects the brokerage practice in Canadian politics. This is the notion that

the setting of public policy requires the accommodation of many different parochial (often regional) interests. Accompanying this has been a belief that only a small elite, representing these varied interests, can successfully make the compromises necessary in shaping these factionalized interests into a national policy (Noel 1977). Consistent with this, party leaders, particularly when in government, have argued that their responsibility is to represent the interests of all voters and not solely those of their active supporters. Party leaders must necessarily balance party members' desire to affect party policy with considerations of brokerage, representation and electoral viability.

It is not surprising, then, that we observe that the closer parties come to government, the more elite-concentrated their decision-making on policy issues becomes. Parties far from government often position themselves as more participatory and democratic than their governing counterparts and, as proof of this, attempt to involve their active members in policy discussion and decision-making. The fledgling farmers' parties of the 1920s, occasionally the CCF and the NDP, and the Reform Party of the early 1990s are all examples of this. Similarly, former governing parties that find themselves mired in the opposition benches often try to reinvigorate themselves by promising their grassroots supporters a greater voice in rebuilding the party and setting its policy course. Unfortunately, these promises rarely last after the party comes close to, or achieves, power. The federal Liberals of the 1960s and 1970s and the Ontario New Democrats of the 1990s provide examples of these phenomena (Clarkson 1979; Cross 2004, 37-9). The participatory enthusiasm sparked by the Liberals' Kingston Conference and subsequently by the early days of Trudeaumania were quickly replaced with a disillusioned membership that once again felt isolated from important party decision-making. Similarly, the Ontario New Democratic Party under the leadership of Bob Rae faced strong criticism from its activist base when the party suddenly found itself in government and decreed, against long-standing party practice, that the parliamentary party (and thus the government) was not bound by the policy dictates of the extraparliamentary party. The result is that voters might be encouraged by perpetual opposition parties and wounded former governing parties to participate in policy debates, but should their preferred party get close to government, this participatory ethos is likely to evaporate. Once burned, voters are unlikely to come back for a second round of disappointment.

The position of the parties' leadership on this issue is not without merit. Successive prime ministers have been correct in asserting that once in government, they are there to serve all Canadians. And it is elected members who are accountable to voters, not the parties' activists. The data provided in the appendix to this paper, describing the socio-demographic makeup of party members, also speak against allowing them a direct role in the making of public policy. They are not representative of the total population. With few young people, disproportionately few women and in most parties a lack of regional and linguistic balance, members may not be well positioned to reflect the varied interests that need to be considered in making public policy. Of course, the parties' elected caucuses regularly reflect the same representational deficits. Nonetheless, the challenge for parties is to create a role for their supporters in policy study and development while not abdicating the responsibility of the parliamentary party to make final policy decisions. It is our view that these are not intractable positions; parties can create an environment in which their grassroots members are invited to contribute to policy study and development in a manner that assists, rather than threatens, the elected party's policy-making responsibilities.

Two democratic reform commissions have recommended that parties establish ongoing policy foundations for these purposes: the 1991 Royal Commission on Electoral Reform and Party Financing and the 2004 New Brunswick Commission on Legislative Democracy. These commissions found Canadian parties lacking both in the provision of participatory opportunities for their members in the development of party policy and in their capacity for ongoing study and development of policy options in aid of their legislative caucuses. Parties in many Western European democracies have established such foundations, allowing them to engage their grassroots supporters in the policy development process and to develop a series of policy alternatives for consideration by the party in elected office.

One reason why Canadian parties have resisted the creation of policy foundations is cost. Canada's extra-parliamentary parties, wholly focused on campaign efforts, have traditionally husbanded their resources for these electoral excursions and expended few resources between campaigns. Parties are reluctant to divert funds to developing and maintaining a permanent policy structure if this is seen as taking away resources that might otherwise be available for campaign efforts. The New Brunswick commission recognized this concern and included in its recommendations partial public

funding for both the start-up and ongoing operations of party policy foundations. This is consistent with the practice in many of the European countries with party policy foundations.

At the federal level, the 2003 changes to the Canada Elections Act provide the parties with ongoing financial support between elections ($1.75 per vote on an annual basis). All of this public funding goes to the parties' central offices. The central parties also routinely claw back all, or a significant portion, of the public funding provided to constituency candidates. Thus, few if any of these taxpayers' dollars are used to support grassroots activity within the parties. There is no reason that Parliament could not require that a portion of these public subventions be directed toward a policy foundation. The tax credit currently available for contributions to federal parties might also be extended to cover additional contributions to policy foundations. Parties may well resist such initiatives, as their emphasis on electoral readiness encourages them to direct their financial resources accordingly. Moreover, parties have traditionally resisted such incursions by the state into their internal affairs. We argue, however, that requiring parties to engage in policy development is not unreasonable, given the extent of the public funds they are receiving. Many party insiders bemoan the decline of Canadian parties as generators of new policy ideas (see Fox 2005); regulations giving parties incentives to reverse this trend would arguably address such concerns.

It is our view that, in the long term, the establishment of vigorous party-policy foundations would not only help to address the concerns of voters about the lack of a meaningful role for them in party politics but also strengthen our parties and our democracy more broadly. At present, our parties have little capacity for generating new policy alternatives. The parliamentary parties are necessarily concerned with the immediate issues of the day, and the extra-parliamentary parties have few resources for anything other than election preparation. The result is that our elected officials are largely dependent on other organizations for policy innovation. The Royal Commission on Electoral Reform and Party Financing captured the essence of this when it concluded: "The dilemma is that the core of the party organization is concerned primarily with elections; it is much less interested in discussing and analyzing political issues that are not connected directly to winning the next election, or in attempting to articulate the broader values of the party" (Royal Commission 1991, 292). Not surprisingly, then, voters interested in influencing public policy issues are not attracted to parties.

The cost to our democracy comes from the fact that parties, not interest groups or policy forums, are charged with brokering the various parochial concerns and forging national interests. If parties are absent in the field of policy study and development, this task is made all the harder. Their absence is filled by advocacy and interest groups that typically represent specific socio-demographic segments of our population and are not charged with finding policy alternatives that serve a national interest. The civil service also plays a role in developing government policy, but there is often little opportunity for ordinary citizens to involve themselves in these processes.

When the legislative parties become involved in policy issues, not only are they ill served by their concern with short-term electoral issues, they are hampered by the representational deficits found within all of the elected caucuses. Liberal caucuses regularly include few members from the Prairie provinces, just as Conservative caucuses have few members from Quebec; and all the parties' caucuses have a shortage of female and visible-minority members.

Party-policy foundations can help to address these concerns by serving as a vehicle for grassroots supporters and substantive experts to participate in the study and development of policy options within each party's broad ideological framework. Foundations can ensure that voices not found in a party's legislative caucus are heard in their work. In this sense, they can assist rather than detract from the accommodative work incumbent upon the national parties. Almost a century ago, the federal Liberal Party changed its method of leadership selection at least partly out of concern that its Quebec-dominated caucus did not reflect the diversity of views that should be heard in the selection of their leader (Courtney 1995, 5). Accordingly, it opened up the process to include its extraparliamentary members from across the country. Our current parties would similarly benefit from an opening up of the policy development process to include their activists and invited experts from all parts of the Canadian community.

Well-functioning policy foundations would provide the legislative parties with a vehicle for the generation of new ideas and for longer-term planning than is currently possible. This might be particularly helpful in assisting parties in making the adjustment from opposition to government. Operating at some distance from the cut and thrust of daily political

debate, foundations can take a longer-range perspective and can prepare policy options outside the constant glare of the media and political adversaries that are the reality for their legislative caucuses.

Conclusion

Over the past century, political party membership in Canada has evolved from a route into the public service to a legitimate and important form of public service. A broad, active and representative membership base connects a political party to its societal base of support and enables it to mobilize support between and during election campaigns. However, Canadian political parties have never been particularly robust membership organizations, and there is some evidence that they face a looming crisis in their ability to recruit members. To some extent, this inability is the product of broad social forces far beyond the control of the parties.

That said, parties are able to conduct their internal affairs in a manner that encourages individuals to join parties in order to engage in meaningful policy discussions and contribute in some small way to policy formulation. Knowing that policy interest motivates party membership in Canada, and that stalwart party members are not content with their circumscribed role in policy development within their party, we see clear potential for parties to involve their members more fully in policy discussions. In an era when Canada's federal political parties are funded largely by the public treasury, it is all the more important that they find ways to engage meaningfully with segments of Canadian society. Moreover, public funding can be structured in a manner that creates incentives for parties to speak directly with citizens on matters of public policy.

Our parties are often criticized for not presenting voters with competing, detailed policy prescriptions. At least in part, this results from a situation in which no branch of the parties' organization is charged with the task of long-term policy study. The parliamentary parties are focused on the cut and thrust of daily politics, the party in central office is little more than an election preparation machine, and the party in the constituencies attract members who are interested in studying policy but are denied any effective capacity to do so.

Policy foundations could benefit parties in several ways. First, they would provide an additional incentive for individuals to join political parties and maintain their membership. The evidence is clear that voters do not see participation in parties as an effective way of influencing public policy. Rather, they prefer activism in interest and advocacy groups, leaving the parties with an aging and often dispirited membership. Parties still rely on their grassroots members for activities such as local election organization and fundraising, so a reinvigorated base of grassroots supporters may well provide electoral dividends.

More important, however, the development of ongoing policy study capacity would better equip the parties to fulfill the responsibilities of the central role they play in Canadian politics. Parties are meant to provide a link between civil society and government. In a sense this is part of the public service role they are meant to play, and for which they are increasingly well funded from the public purse. Central to this task is the collection and brokering of policy interests from among competing groups of voters. Their ability to perform this task is compromised when voters do not engage with them in the policy realm. The establishment of policy foundations would provide an opportunity for parties to hear from civil society interests and policy experts in regions and from socio-demographic groups that are not included in their parliamentary caucuses. In doing so they would be better equipped for the accommodative role required of our national parties.

It is both our parties and the character of our democracy that suffer when parties are not fully engaged in the policy study enterprise. The solution is not to strengthen the policy capacity of the leaders' offices or of the Prime Minister's Office. While such an approach might enrich the policy offerings of the parties, it would do little to reinvigorate the connections between parties and citizens. We end then by recalling that while Canadians are largely dissatisfied with the operations of their political parties, they believe them to be key instruments of their democratic practice. Voters have not given up on parties. Let us hope that, at least in the realm of policy study, parties have not given up on voters.

Appendix
Demographic Profiles of Party Members, Canada, 2000 (percent)*

	Total	Bloc	CA	Liberal	NDP	PC
Gender						
Male	62	64	68	53	54	67
Female	38	36	32	47	46	33
Age						
Over 65	46	37	59	33	40	53
Under 30	5	5	2	12	3	4
Education						
High school or less	28	33	35	23	26	26
College	16	15	24	11	17	13
University	36	35	28	41	31	38
Postgraduate	21	18	13	24	26	25
Family income						
< $20,000	9	14	9	9	10	6
> $100,000	15	11	13	19	10	21
Mother tongue						
English	71	0	88	61	83	87
French	19	99	1	28	4	6
Other	10	1	11	11	13	7
Ethnicity						
Born outside Canada	13	3	14	14	20	12

Source: "Study of Canadian Political Party Members," 2000.
Note: *N* = 3,872.
* Columns may not add up to 100 due to rounding.

Notes

1 The Study of Canadian Political Party Members is a mail-back survey of randomly selected members of the five major Canadian political parties conducted from March to May 2000. The survey was mailed to a regionally stratified random sample drawn from the membership lists of the political parties. The regional sampling process varied by party. Where possible, a regional weighting variable was created. This was not possible for the Liberal Party or the Bloc Québécois. A total of 10,928 surveys were mailed to partisans, and 3,872 completed surveys were returned, yielding an overall response rate of 36 percent. All 3,872 surveys returned were usable. Results regarding rates of party activism in Quebec suggest that the Quebec sample was drawn from a list of activists, not members, so Quebec Liberals are excluded from all analyses of rates of activism to avoid overstating such rates. Membership in Canadian political parties fluctuates significantly over the course of an election cycle, so the timing of the survey is significant. Because the study was undertaken during a period when there was no election anticipated and no leadership contests underway, we expect that the members sampled are longer-term, more active members than would be captured had the survey been conducted when leadership or nomination contests were under way. The Canadian Alliance did have a leadership contest beginning in May 2000, but the list from which the sample was drawn was closed before the beginning of that leadership contest. This ensured that none of the members recruited by leadership candidates were included in the survey. The survey was funded by a Standard Research Grant from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada.

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Résumés

R. Kenneth Carty *(suite de la page 31)*

centralisé, alors que sa base populaire diminuait et devenait de plus en plus étroite. Les équations fluctuantes qui ont structuré la situation des différents partis ont fini par mener à la prédominance du centre du pays (l'Ontario), mais, ce faisant, elles ont aussi transformé le Parti libéral en parti régional (le « parti de l'Ontario »), comme ses opposants. Le Canada se retrouve donc réduit à faire fonctionner un système de partis d'accommodement sans qu'il y ait véritablement de partis en mesure de jouer ce rôle.

Quel type de partis politiques voulons-nous ? Quel type de compétition souhaitons-nous entre ces partis ? Voilà ce qui est au centre de la question de la réforme électorale au Canada. Plusieurs provinces se sont déjà lancées dans des projets de réformes électorales ; leurs premiers ministres semblent donc convaincus que de nouvelles institutions sont nécessaires pour transformer la politique « de partis ». Il reste toutefois à convaincre ceux qui croient qu'il faut rétablir notre système de partis d'accommodement. La question persistante de la nature et de la forme des partis politiques ainsi que de leur place dans les affaires publiques canadiennes est au cœur de ce débat.

William Cross and Lisa Young *(suite de la page 31)*

politique des partis mais aussi à renforcer les partis eux-mêmes et, de façon plus générale, la démocratie. À l'heure actuelle, l'aptitude des partis à développer de nouvelles orientations politiques est faible. Les partis parlementaires tendent forcément à se limiter aux questions immédiates tandis que les partis extraparlementaires ont peu de ressources à consacrer à des activités autres que la préparation aux élections. C'est pourquoi nos élus s'en remettent largement à d'autres organisations pour l'innovation politique. La création et le maintien, par les partis politiques, de fondations qui se consacreraient à la formulation de politiques donneraient à la base la possibilité d'influencer leur orientation politique en même temps qu'ils donneraient aux partis parlementaires les ressources nécessaires pour définir leurs politiques.

Les auteurs constatent que c'est l'intérêt envers les enjeux politiques qui motive l'adhésion aux partis et que même les partisans les plus ardents sont insatisfaits du rôle limité qu'on leur accorde dans le développement des politiques de leur parti. Ils estiment donc que les partis ne devraient pas avoir de problème à amener leurs membres à prendre part aux discussions sur les politiques. Comme les partis fédéraux tirent une part importante de leur financement des fonds publics, il est d'autant plus important qu'ils engagent des échanges fructueux avec divers éléments de la société canadienne. En outre, ce financement public pourrait être structuré de façon à inciter les partis à dialoguer directement avec la population au sujet des enjeux de la politique publique.

Summaries

R. Kenneth Carty *(cont. from page 32)*

political competition have ultimately led to the triumph of the centre (Ontario) but in doing so have also led to the emergence of the Liberals as a party of Ontario – a party now as regional as any of its opponents. The result has been that Canada is left trying to practise brokerage politics with no genuine brokerage parties.

The question of electoral reform is really a question of what kind of political parties we want and what kind of electoral competition we want them to engage in. The premiers, who have launched an electoral reform agenda in several provinces, seem convinced that new institutions are needed to produce a new party politics. Those who believe that Canada's distinctive brokerage politics must be restored remain to be convinced. At the heart of this debate is the continuing question of the nature, shape and place of political parties in Canadian public life.

William Cross and Lisa Young *(cont. from page 32)*

extraparliamentary parties have few resources for anything other than election preparation. The result is that our elected officials are largely dependent on other organizations for policy innovation. Formal policy foundations, organized and maintained by the political parties, would both provide opportunity for grassroots members to influence a party's policy direction and act as an ongoing policy resource for the parliamentary party.

Knowing that policy interest motivates party membership in Canada, and that stalwart party members are not content with their circumscribed role in policy development within their party, the authors see clear potential for parties to involve their members in policy discussions. In an era when Canada's federal political parties are largely funded by the public treasury, it is all the more important that they find ways to engage meaningfully with segments of Canadian society. Moreover, public funding can be structured in a manner that creates incentives for parties to speak directly with citizens on matters of public policy.

Résumés

The Shifting Place of Political Parties in Canadian Public Life

R. Kenneth Carty

Les partis politiques jouent un rôle fondamental au Canada : leurs efforts quotidiens permettent d'obtenir les compromis nécessaires à la mise en place des politiques publiques. En démocratie, la lutte électorale que se livrent les différents partis exige que ceux-ci engagent les citoyens à participer aux affaires publiques. Le constat, très répandu, selon lequel le pays souffre d'un déficit démocratique est donc en fait un jugement porté à la fois sur la place qu'occupent les partis dans la vie démocratique canadienne et sur le fait qu'ils ne jouent pas le rôle qu'exige la démocratie participative. C'est pourquoi plusieurs souhaitent une réforme électorale, dans l'espoir que la transformation des institutions qui régissent l'organisation et l'activité des partis politiques posera les bases de partis renouvelés et rajeunis.

Le système de partis canadien est unique. Le modèle qui le caractérise – les partis politiques dits d'accommodement cherchent en fait à concilier et à freiner les intérêts plutôt que de les promouvoir et de les articuler – a conduit à une situation particulière qui réduit pratiquement le rôle des citoyens à celui de simples votants, et où les chefs de parti dominent les batailles électorales personnalisées et les joutes parlementaires.

Le type de compétition qui existe entre les différents partis au Canada a été façonné par le système électoral majoritaire uninominal, qui a transformé plusieurs régions du pays en fiefs de l'un ou de l'autre des partis pendant de longues périodes. Par conséquent, de trop nombreux citoyens ne peuvent participer de façon significative aux affaires publiques, et la compétition entre les partis est devenue en grande partie une affaire de régions. La stabilité créée par cette dynamique n'a pas toujours été à toute épreuve, et, à plusieurs occasions, des séismes électoraux ont restructuré le paysage politique. La seule constante reste la domination exercée par le Parti libéral au cours du XX^e^ siècle.

Toutefois, cette suprématie électorale apparemment facile des libéraux – l'un des partis politiques ayant connu le plus de succès dans l'ensemble des pays démocratiques du monde – masque une transformation à long terme du parti. Au cours des dernières décennies, le Parti libéral s'est de plus en plus *(suite à la page 29)*

Are Canadian Political Parties Empty Vessels? Membership, Engagement and Policy Capacity

William Cross and Lisa Young

Les bénévoles jouent depuis longtemps un rôle important au sein des partis politiques canadiens, que ce soit à titre de travailleurs de campagne électorale, de supporters des candidats à la direction des partis ou à un poste de député, ou d'organisateurs locaux. Aujourd'hui, toutefois, la politique est dominée par les professionnels et les médias, de sorte que le rôle déjà circonscrit des membres des partis est encore plus limité qu'auparavant. Dans cet article où ils analysent les résultats d'un sondage effectué en 2000 auprès de membres des cinq principaux partis politiques de l'époque, les auteurs constatent que ceux-ci sont insatisfaits du peu d'influence qu'ils exercent sur les choix de politiques adoptées par les partis et sont particulièrement mécontents de voir que les professionnels politiques ont usurpé le rôle traditionnel des membres des partis.

L'adhésion à un parti étant une forme de service à la collectivité qui, de ce fait, contribue au dynamisme de la vie politique, les auteurs affirment qu'il y a lieu de se préoccuper du fait que le niveau d'adhésion semble diminuer, que la plupart des membres approchent l'âge de la retraite, qu'il n'y a pas de relève et que le niveau de militantisme au sein des partis est relativement faible. Toutes ces tendances découlent de transformations sociales complexes et sont renforcées par des contraintes institutionnelles qui ont limité le rôle des membres des partis politiques par le passé. Aussi ne se prêtent-elles pas à des solutions faciles. Cross et Young estiment, néanmoins, qu'on pourrait favoriser l'adhésion aux partis politiques et amener ceux-ci à remplir leur rôle dans la vie publique en les encourageant à donner aux membres de la base un rôle plus important dans l'élaboration de leurs positions en matière de politiques publiques.

Selon les deux auteurs, pour que les partis politiques canadiens puissent accroître le nombre de leurs adhérents et, surtout, pour qu'ils puissent les amener à prendre part à leurs activités de façon régulière, ils doivent donner aux électeurs plus de possibilités d'influencer les positions des partis touchant aux enjeux de la politique publique. Ils croient que, à long terme, la mise en place de fondations d'orientation aiderait non seulement les électeurs à s'engager dans la vie *(suite à la page 29)*

Summaries

The Shifting Place of Political Parties in Canadian Public Life

R. Kenneth Carty

Canada is a party country, put together and sustained by the daily struggles of party politicians as they seek to build the accommodations necessary to support public policy. The challenges of democratic electoral competition require that political parties engage citizens in a way that provides for effective public involvement and service. Thus, the widespread perception that the country suffers from a democratic deficit is ultimately a judgment on the place of the party in Canadian public life and the failure of parties to meet the demands of modern participatory politics. The result has been a call for electoral reform, in the hope that by transforming the institutions that govern party organization and activity we will provide the basis for a renewed and rejuvenated party politics.

The reality is that the Canadian party system is unique. The famous brokerage pattern of Canadian politics – in which political parties are political brokers, accommodating and stifling rather than advancing and articulating interests – has led to a distinctive organizational style in which active citizens are reduced to being merely voters and in which party leaders easily dominate personalized electoral and parliamentary games.

Competition between Canada's brokerage parties has been shaped by the first-past-the-post electoral system, which has rendered large regions of the country uncompetitive for long periods. The result is that too many citizens are excluded from meaningful participation in their nation's business and competition is structured in highly regionalized terms. The political balances created by this dynamic have not been stable, and on several occasions electoral earthquakes have restructured the political landscape. The one constant of this party politics throughout the twentieth century was the role of the Liberals as the country's dominant and governing party.

The apparently easy electoral supremacy of the Liberals – one of the democratic world's most successful political parties – masks a long-term transformation of the party. Over recent decades the Liberal Party has become more centralized, while its popular base has grown both smaller and narrower. The shifting political equations that have structured *(cont. on page 30)*

Are Canadian Political Parties Empty Vessels? Membership, Engagement and Policy Capacity

William Cross and Lisa Young

Volunteers have traditionally played a significant role in Canadian political parties, as campaign workers, supporters of candidates for party leadership or nomination, and local organizers. In the contemporary era of professionalized, media-oriented politics, however, the already circumscribed role of the Canadian party member has been limited even further. In this paper, the authors analyze the data of a 2000 survey of members of what were then Canada's five major political parties and find that party members are not satisfied with their ability to shape party policy and are particularly resentful of the extent to which political professionals have usurped the role of the party member.

Because party membership in Canada is a form of public service and thus contributes to the vibrancy of political life in the country, the authors argue that we should be concerned that rates of party membership appear to be dropping, the average party member is nearing retirement and is not being replaced, and rates of activism within parties are relatively low. All of these tendencies are products of complex social change, reinforced by institutional constraints that have historically limited the role of Canadian party members. As such, they defy easy solutions. Cross and Young argue, however, that one approach that might encourage party membership and help political parties to fulfill their roles in public life would be to encourage parties to give a more meaningful, ongoing role in the development of their public policy positions to their rank-and-file members.

They suggest that if parties are to attract more Canadians as members and, more important, as ongoing participants in their affairs, they need to offer voters greater opportunities to influence party stances on questions of public policy. It is their view that in the long term, the establishment of vigorous party-policy foundations would not only help to address the concerns of voters about the lack of a meaningful role for them in party politics but would also strengthen our parties and our democracy more broadly. At present, our parties have little capacity for generating new policy alternatives. The parliamentary parties are necessarily concerned with the immediate issues of the day and the *(cont. on page 30)*